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Church slave tunnel 'reopens'

By EARL ARNETT

For more than 100 years, members of the congregation at the Orchard Street Church told stories of an underground tunnel used to smuggle slaves out of Baltimore. The entrance was supposed to be in the furnace room, but after the Civil war ended in 1865, the secret of its location disappeared.

The church itself almost disappeared after the congregation moved away about four years ago. Abandoned, vandalized and damaged by fire, the brick structure stood awaiting destruction by urban renewal. Actually, it was two structures, one facing 510 Orchard street and connected to a smaller building behind it, which once fronted on an alley. The larger church building was apparently built in 1858, while the older structure reportedly dates to 1827-1837.

Legend related that the first church was built at night both by slaves and free blacks. Women supposedly held torches while dedicated craftsmen used their spare evening hours to build a Methodist house of worship.

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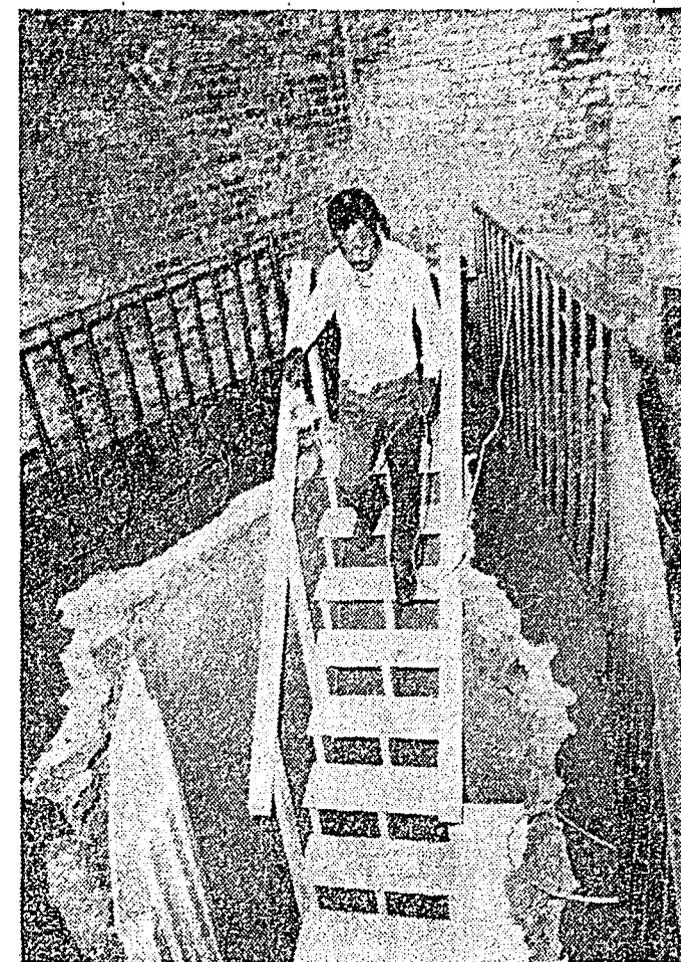
Some of the white planners saw the sturdy edifice only as an obstacle to their vision of progress.

As a result, the Committee for the Preservation of Orchard Street Church was formed. Mrs. W. A. C. Hughes led the struggle to persuade city officials that the church should be saved. They

were successful and in 1974 the city gave the committee almost \$18,000 as seed money to begin a restoration effort.

Last year, spurred by the efforts of Elizabeth Murphy Oliver, the committee managed in a remarkably short time to have the church placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Such success seemed providential to Mrs. Hughes. Another stroke of luck occurred last April, when Glasco Ryales discovered the tunnel. Mr. Ryales is a musician from New Jersey who visited Baltimore about seven months ago on his way home from Miami. He remained here and became general manager of



Summers photos—Ralph L. Robinson

At left is the Orchard Street Methodist Church, including the old building at the rear. Above, Glasco Ryales descends to the tunnel in the old church.

the new city landmark.

In the process, he began exploring the two connected structures, probing walls and ceilings for old bottles, looking for artifacts, exposing architectural details that had been covered over. And in the furnace room of the old building, beneath a chimney, he found a vertical

space that provided room enough for a man.

He climbed down and felt a sandy area behind his feet that enabled him to stoop. Then, there it was—a brick-lined tunnel leading under the floor.

It's not a large tunnel, just big enough
See SLAVE, B3, Col. 1

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to crawl through, but it gets larger after turning a bend, he said. Then you can get comfortably on your knees. Where does it go? Nobody knows for sure, but oral history has it extending as far as the Mount Royal station. Mr. Ryales has cleared about 30 feet and discovered that part of it has collapsed.

It's a remarkable piece of engineering. The top is supported by strips of iron placed after each brick. Whoever built the tunnel did so with care and deliberation. What else could it be, but an avenue of freedom for slaves seeking the North Star, ask members of the restoration committee.

They are so sure that the church and its tunnel represent an important cog in the famous Underground Railroad that they are sponsoring a black-tie, \$25 subscription "grand opening of the underground slave tunnel" with champagne and hors d'oeuvres this Saturday. (Thereafter, admission will be by appointment only until arrangements can be made for public visits.)

A steel door donated by the Bethlehem Steel Corporation guards the furnace room, where a hole has been excavated to expose a section of the tunnel. Outside, a plaque reads: "Dedicated to the cause of freedom imbued in those who passed through this doorway."

The history of the slave trade in Baltimore and the resistance to it is extremely difficult to document.

Modern historians and other cultural figures in the city have been strangely reluctant to examine this aspect of Baltimore's heritage. Foreign ob-

servers confirmed that Baltimore had a flourishing slave trade business from at least 1820-1850, both a legal, internal trade with states in the deeper South and an illegal foreign trade by way of clip-pers from Africa.

The city also had a long tradition of opposition to slavery. The Quakers formed the vanguard, but other citizens were involved as well. A Maryland Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery and the Relief of Free Negroes and Others Unlawfully Held in Bondage was formed in Baltimore as early as 1789.

Truman Pratt (called Trueman Le Pratt in the deeds), the founder of the Orchard Street Church, had supposedly been a slave before his flight to Boston. He had subsequently returned to Baltimore and negotiated to buy his freedom.

Was the Orchard Street Church built at night to prevent detection of the tunnel? Did Harriet Tubman, the most famous conductor on the Underground Railroad, visit the church? Or Frederick Douglass? How did an underground movement survive all the restrictions placed on Maryland blacks before the Civil War?

Unfortunately, there are almost no historical documents to answer such questions. But now there is the tunnel. It seems to speak for itself, and everyone at the church wants to believe its message.

At the moment, they badly need money to continue the immense task of restoration and they dream of a comprehensive cultural center in and around the church.

Contributions can be made by addressing them to the church.